

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY
NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

**WHERE YOU STAND DEPENDS UPON WHAT (OR WHETHER) YOU FLY:
BUREAUCRATIC POLITICS AND THE GULF WAR AIR CAMPAIGN**

CORE COURSE 3 ESSAY

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Course 3: The National Security Policy Process
Seminar N
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"Where you Stand Depends on What (or Whether) You Fly:
Bureaucratic Politics and the Gulf Air War Campaign"
by LTC Richard King
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INTRODUCTION

By almost all accounts, the Gulf War air campaign was the most successful demonstration of air power in history. In just 43 days of combat, air operations isolated and incapacitated the Iraqi command structure, severely degraded their military production, virtually destroyed the Iraqi Air Force, and significantly reduced the overall combat effectiveness of the Iraqi Army in the Kuwait Theater of Operations (KTO) ¹ Not surprisingly, the official post-war assessment by the House Armed Services committee (the "Aspin Report") stated in its number one finding: "The decisive factor in the war with Iraq was the air campaign. .."²

In the aftermath of Desert Storm, many claimed that much of the success of the air campaign was due to the unprecedented degree of "unity of command" and "unity of effort" made possible by several legislative and doctrinal changes enacted since Vietnam ³ Previous air campaigns had been bedeviled by interservice squabbling and disjointed, often uncoordinated efforts ⁴ Prior to the Gulf War, however, the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1985 strengthened the hand of the war fighting Commanders-in-Chief (CINCs) as well as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), at the expense of the services. Additionally, the 1986 release of Joint Chiefs of Staff Publication 26 (JCS Pub 26) finally codified the position of the Joint Force Air Component Commander (JFACC). Together, these documents were intended to ensure air campaigns would be centrally run by a single functional commander, responsible only to the theater CINC. Furthermore, centralized authority would ensure that inevitable disputes between the various participants would be settled rationally, based on theater-wide war fighting

requirements rather than individual service desires.⁵ Those who developed Goldwater-Nichols and JCS Pub 26 were thus attempting to guarantee informed, purposive decision-making in the conduct of the campaign, along the lines of Graham Allison's classic conceptual Model I.⁶ The overwhelming success of Desert Storm air operations implies they succeeded.

Unfortunately, that's not what actually happened. Despite the extensive effort to ensure optimized decision-making and strict rationality, traditional bureaucratic politics nevertheless played the dominant role in the development, conduct and assessment of the air campaign during the Gulf War. Most key decisions were not "made", so to speak, but rather "emerged" from an intense competition between the players, who took strong positions in support of their institutional views and organizational interests. To prove this point--that the Gulf War air campaign can best be understood within the context of Allison's bureaucratic politics model (Model III)--this paper begins by looking briefly at the views of the various players prior to the start of the Gulf crisis. It then discusses how the politics--at the theater level--played out in the planning, the execution, and the critical day-to-day evaluation of the results of the air campaign. Finally, it concludes by examining what might have been different (and perhaps better) about the campaign had a more consistent, reasoned decision-making process applied.

THE BACKGROUND--SERVICE VIEWS ON AIR POWER

Prior to the Gulf War, all four services possessed abundant air assets.⁷

Unfortunately, they also held very different views--stemming from their historical experiences and doctrinal beliefs--on how that air power ought to be applied in war. Goldwater-Nichols and JCS Pub 26 had muted but not ended the long-running debate. True, service staffs and service chiefs could no longer interfere directly with a CINC's plans, and "jointness" was the new watchword for military operations. However, as Allison might have predicted, service prejudices, traditions and doctrine could still powerfully influence a theater campaign.

For the Air Force, long the major advocate of centralized control, enshrinement of the JFACC concept in joint doctrine was the culmination of 43 years of bureaucratic effort.⁸ Within the Air Force, air power zealots saw the JFACC as the means by which the Air Force would rightfully dominate the planning and execution of all future air campaigns. The other services were understandably resistant to the concept of centralized control in general and the JFACC in particular. The Navy, traditionally focused on waging a virtually independent war at sea, was wary of a theater air commander without maritime experience.⁹ Additionally, the Navy's concept of air warfare, based on independent operations of carrier task forces, was essentially decentralized, as opposed to the Air Force's faith in massed, centralized operations. The Army, though not opposed to the JFACC concept in principle, had serious disagreements with the Air Force over the role of air power in theater war. Army "AirLand Battle" doctrine envisioned a much greater degree of land commander control over picking "deep" targets (and a far more subordinate role for air power) than the Air Force was willing to concede.¹⁰ However, of all the services, the Marine Corps was

clearly the most resistant to the JFACC concept. The Marines saw their air assets as an indispensable part of an indivisible "air-ground team". They continually denied the authority of the JFACC (referring to the position as an "air coordinator" rather than a functional "air commander"¹¹), and fiercely opposed the idea that there could be circumstances where their organic air assets would not remain directly tied to the Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF) ¹² Upon publication of JCS Pub 26, the Marines had quickly forced through the joint doctrine process an ambiguous compromise, the so-called "Omnibus Agreement", which sought to specify when and how much Marine air might be available to the JFACC

Thus, on the eve of the Gulf War, despite a veneer of jointness engendered by Goldwater-Nichols, traditional bureaucratic service rivalries still remained--as military analyst Rick Atkinson pointed out in Crusade "Rivalry in the U S. military was bred in the bone, and it would ever be thus "¹³ Unfortunately, these traditional tensions were further exacerbated as the Cold War ended and service budgets declined In the coming conflict, each service would seek to showcase its own role and usefulness.¹⁴

PLANNING THE AIR CAMPAIGN

Given this background, it is not surprising that from the start of the crisis planning for the air campaign degenerated from a rational into a bureaucratic approach Following a key tenet of bureaucratic politics--that "the first position on the street has the advantage" ¹⁵--the Air Force quickly proposed a concept for a centralized, offensive air campaign Significantly, this initiative came not from the

JFACC, whose job it was to plan and execute the air campaign, but from the Air Staff in Washington.¹⁶ Their gameplan, known as Instant Thunder, envisioned an overwhelming strategic air campaign centered on Baghdad, using all available assets orchestrated by the JFACC. With few other offensive options available at the time, Instant Thunder was approved in principle by both the CJCS, General Powell, and the theater CINC, General Schwarzkopf, within two weeks of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Significantly, this was well before any of the other services had had an opportunity to provide much input.¹⁷ Consequently, the Air Force plan, and Air Force planners¹⁸, would remain dominant throughout the campaign.

To further enforce their vision, the Air Force planners on the JFACC staff used a number of bureaucratic "sticks and carrots". The primary day-to-day planning and management tool, the Air Tasking Order, or ATO, was produced by the Air Force's Tactical Air Control Center. In order to lessen the very real possibility of fratricide, all sorties over land (except helicopters) had to be listed in the daily ATO. Therefore, at least in theory, all sorties were subject to JFACC approval. Additionally, the distances in the Gulf were great. To reach virtually all targets required in-flight refueling--and the Air Force owned and controlled the tankers. Finally, as Allison's Model III highlights, personality played a key role. The man most responsible for the nuts and bolts planning of the air campaign--Air Force Brigadier General Buster Glosson--was a skilled and experienced bureaucratic operator. According to Atkinson, "Those he could neither command nor charm, he often outwitted."¹⁹

The Air Force thus gained and maintained a significant advantage in the

development of the campaign. However, the long, six-month planning effort left ample opportunities for the other services to force modifications more palatable to their institutional interests. Paradoxically, it was the personalities of the top leadership that left the door open. General Schwarzkopf believed that successful warfare was decentralized--he gave each of his commanders a "slice of the desert".²⁰ And, according to the definitive postwar assessment of the air campaign, The Gulf War Air Power Survey, the JFACC, Air Force Lieutenant General Horner, used his broad authority "with sufficient discretion to get his job done while maintaining good relations with the other services and the allies."²¹ Rather than force top-down decisions, he generally refused to make any service do anything it did not want to do.²² Thus power was to a large extent shared rather than centralized. The result was a number of push-pull compromises, based on each service's war fighting concepts, which eventually came to shape planning for the campaign nearly as much as the Air Force's initial vision.

Given the strong high-level support, the other services could not hope to fundamentally alter the general concept of the air campaign. They did, however, achieve a number of modifications through negotiation. The Navy, with its component commander afloat in the Gulf, consistently found itself outranked during the bureaucratic struggles at Central Command Headquarters in Riyadh.²³ Naval planners therefore followed another principle of bureaucratic politics--that "half a loaf is better than none." Doctrinally obsessed with protecting the fleet (despite a negligible Iraqi naval threat), the Navy demanded and got control over all fleet defense sorties. On

other matters, however, they accepted a "team player, not team captain" role.²⁴ The Marines, citing the Omnibus agreement, agreed to provide sorties initially for JFACC tasking, yet withheld at least half for planned eventual use by the MAGTF.²⁵ And the Army, in order to preserve attack helicopters for use during the ground war, refused to allow their tasking by the JFACC during the air campaign²⁶ but did consent (at least initially) to JFACC use of the Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS).²⁷ By virtue of these negotiations, each of the component forces in the Gulf served its own organizational self-interest while at the same time participating in the air campaign, albeit to a more limited extent than the initial plan had called for.

A final blow to the coherence of the plan came from the CINC himself, just two days before the start of the war. In a well-publicized eruption, Schwarzkopf demanded that B-52 attacks on Iraqi Republican Guard commence at the very beginning of the campaign.²⁸ With the strong support of the Army and Marines he also directed that greater attention be given early on to Iraqi forces in the KTC. After six months of detailed preparation, the planners scrambled to make these significant changes happen in time.

As a result of all this maneuvering, the final version of the air campaign plan looked much different than what any of the participants, or the leadership, would have deliberately chosen. While still bearing a strong resemblance to Instant Thunder, the now-diluted strategic portion of the plan no longer possessed the complete concentration initially envisioned by the Air Force. Too many potential sorties had been skimmed off or withheld by the other services. On the other hand, the design

was not decentralized or flexible enough to suit the other services, either. If you wanted to fly, you had to be in the ATO, and the ATO process did not respond well to fast-changing situations on the ground or at sea. In truth, the air campaign design was far less a top-down, rational picture than post-war assessments have painted.

EXECUTION OF THE AIR CAMPAIGN

If bureaucratic politics played a key role in the development of the air campaign plan, it was an even more critical determinate of how the campaign was conducted. Disputes between the services arose early and often. These disputes, as Allison pointed out long ago, inevitably spring from the different perceptions and priorities of reasonable men.²⁹ The resultant conflict and bargaining significantly shaped the execution of the air campaign.

Air Force planners, using their dominant position on the JFACC staff and the leverage provided by the ATO, attempted to stay true to the vision of a centralized, decisive strategic air campaign before turning to "preparation of the battlefield" to pave the way for the subsequent ground war. The other services didn't see it that way. The Navy maintained control of significant carrier sorties--30 to 50%-- throughout the war for fleet defense.³⁰ Additionally, naval commanders continually sought to strike targets critical to maritime warfare (such as Iraqi port facilities and Silkworm anti-ship missile sites) which USAF planners felt were unimportant to the overall theater campaign.³¹ Nevertheless, hostage to USAF tanker support to reach targets in Iraq from the carriers positioned offshore, and hoping to turn in the best possible performance in a

campaign it was ill-equipped to wage³², the Navy generally worked within the JFACC centralized tasking.³³ The Marines, on the other hand, admittedly "gamed the ATO process".³⁴ Citing the Omnibus Agreement, they almost immediately began to withdraw sorties (eventually 85%) to bomb the targets they wanted to bomb, in front of the Marine divisions they wanted to support.³⁵ This suboptimization forced General Horner to make tradeoffs in order to get any Marine support for deeper operations.³⁶ The strategic portion of the air campaign, while indisputably effective, was thus diluted.

By far the most contentious issues, however, were between the JFACC and his USAF planners, and the ground commanders. As the Army's official postwar assessment, Certain Victory, pointed out, "Preparing for the ground battle brought to the forefront longstanding cultural differences between the Air Force and the Army."³⁷ Army corps commanders, concerned with going through the breach, wanted heavy bombing of the Iraqi frontline infantry divisions. Furthermore, they wanted to pick the targets. The JFACC, on the other hand, was responding to CINC direction by concentrating pressure on the Republican Guard, deployed far to the rear, and continuing the strategic air campaign. Additionally, air planners insisted that "deep" targeting was their turf. They could do the best job of selecting targets to prepare the battlefield.³⁸ Interestingly, during this dispute Army staff officers felt they were in a disadvantageous bureaucratic position, because the JFACC could go directly to the CINC whereas the senior Army commander, General Yeosock, lacked access. He had to compete with the other major ground elements--the Arab Command and the Marines--or General Schwarzkopf's attention.³⁹ The result was Schwarzkopf's

establishment of a "Joint Targeting Board", chaired by the Deputy CINC, Army General Waller. While this bureaucratic forum did see to the ground commanders interests, it also diluted the JFACC's authority and diffused the air effort.⁴⁰ Fewer sorties than initially planned were flown against the Republican Guard (which the CINC himself had designated an Iraqi "center of gravity"), and the strategic campaign virtually ceased, while in retrospect far more sorties than necessary struck the conscript frontline Iraqi divisions⁴¹

A final JFACC-Army issue, near the very end of the war, also had a big impact.

According to the Gulf War Air Power Survey:

To avoid JFACC control, XVIII Airborne Corps advanced the FSCL [the Fire Support Coordination Line--a line on the campaign maps inside which, to avoid friendly fire accidents, the ground commander, not the JFACC, controlled all sorties] well north of the Euphrates River on 27 February and thus reserved an area for attack helicopter operations unconstrained by any requirement to coordinate with the JFACC. The effect of this use of the FSCL was to hamper air power's ability to destroy escaping Iraqi ground forces until the FSCL was finally pulled back after several hours⁴²

By some estimates, this bureaucratic maneuver (and a similar one by the Army's VII Corps) allowed two divisions of the Republican Guard to escape destruction from the air during the Iraqi retreat⁴³

In the end, though the air campaign was undoubtedly highly successful, none of the players was particularly pleased with the way it was waged. Key decisions tended to evolve from conflict between the participants. Seldom were they made rationally, from the perspective of what was best for the overall effort.

ASSESSING THE AIR CAMPAIGN

Bureaucratic politics, both within the theater and between Riyadh and Washington, also marred the continual effort to assess the progress of the air campaign. Battle Damage Assessment, or BDA, was particularly critical in the Gulf War, for the CINC planned to start the ground campaign only after air power had reduced the Iraqi forces by 50% throughout the theater.⁴⁴ Schwarzkopf therefore put the Army in charge of the assessment effort.⁴⁵ BDA quickly became the measure of effectiveness of the air campaign. With the Army responsible for evaluating the Air Force's progress, in a procedure that was more art than science, what should have been an imminently rational process quickly degenerated into bureaucratic squabbling. The Army, determined to be conservative, continually changed their assessment formulas, while the JFACC staff negotiated vociferously for kill criteria and inputs which they felt more accurately reflected the real impact of the air effort. No decision was ever final, and assessments of remaining Iraqi effectiveness changed continually.⁴⁶

Added to the mix was the on-going dispute between Schwarzkopf's headquarters, Central Command (CENTCOM), and the national-level intelligence players with a stake in the issue. The Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) issued BDA assessments to the President and the CJCS which seriously contradicted those of the in-theater analysts and angered the CINC. CIA and DIA, approaching the issue from a different perspective, used different formulas, criteria, and technical means of assessing the damage than CENTCOM. The

national agencies were determined to avoid the "light at the end of the tunnel" syndrome that had characterized field reports during Vietnam. In addition, some suspected, they were anxious to preserve their reputations should the ground war go badly.⁴⁷ As Schwarzkopf himself later said, "If we'd waited to convince the CIA, we'd still be in Saudi Arabia."⁴⁸ According to Atkinson, "Underlying the dispute was a struggle for control between two bureaucratic organizations, a turf battle exacerbated by the inevitable friction between a field headquarters and Washington."⁴⁹

In the end the Army (specifically a friend of Schwarzkopf's⁵⁰) literally brokered the process, operating on the theory that if they "angered both sides in the debate equally, perhaps the BDA was close to the mark."⁵¹ It worked, but it was a far cry from the inherently rational process that assessment should have been. There was just too much at stake for the various players.

CONCLUSION

Despite laws, rules, and doctrine developed since Vietnam to ensure rationality in the conduct of military operations, it was familiar bureaucratic politics that drove decision-making throughout the Desert Storm air campaign. While the Goldwater-Nichols legislation and accompanying joint doctrine reforms brought an increase in jointness, and provided the mechanism for centralized decision-making, there was no corresponding effort to alter traditional service cultures.⁵² Furthermore, those handed the broad authority to exercise top-down decision-making, specifically the CINC and the JFACC, were by personality not inclined to use it fully. As a result, as Allison's

Model III predicted, the development, execution, and assessment of the air campaign were largely determined by bureaucratic political tactics. Decisions evolved more from access, influence, bargaining, and personality, reflecting the stands of the individual services, than from rational choice based on theater considerations as a whole. In consequence, the plan was diluted, the campaign itself lost some focus, and the assessment, if not flawed, was far from analytically consistent. Had a more reasoned approach applied, the strategic portion of the air campaign might have been prosecuted more aggressively and not terminated so soon.⁵³ More of the Republican Guard might have been destroyed. And there would have been less wasteful "overkill" on the conscript infantry divisions manning the Iraqi front lines.

On the whole, however, the bureaucratic maneuvering and continual compromising actually had surprisingly little effect on the success of the air campaign.

The Gulf War Air Power Survey explains why:

The superabundance of Coalition aircraft, the absence of serious opposition in the air or effective attack against coalition air bases, and the ability of the Coalition to choose the timing of the war's beginning all meant that neither the theater commander nor the JFACC ever had to make hard choices in less favorable circumstances. They never, for example, had to strip Marines of air support provided by Marine aircraft, they never had to endanger the fleet by leaving it with less than full air defenses in the face of Iraqi air attack, they never had to pull air cover from the soldiers of an ally in the face of enemy attack.⁵⁴

In short, during the Gulf War we fought "big" but not necessarily "smart". While the air campaign was undoubtedly far more coherent than previous air operations, thanks to bureaucratic politics it still lacked complete unity of effort. Next time we may not have that luxury

NOTES

¹ Office of the Secretary of Defense, Final Report to Congress: Conduct of the Persian Gulf War (Washington, D C . GPO, 1992) 244 .

² Les Aspin, Chairman, Committee on Armed Services, U.S. House of Representatives, Defense for a New Era: Lessons of the Persian Gulf War (Washington D C.: GPO, 1992) viii.

³ General Charles Horner, "The Air Campaign: Reflections on Desert Storm", Briefing to Congress, 1991, slide 16., and Lt Gen Michael Nelson, "Power Projection," The Future of Air Power in the Aftermath of the Gulf War, ed. Richard Schultz and Robert Pfaltzgraff (Maxwell, AL.: Air University Press, 1992) 120.

⁴ Thomas A. Keaney and Eliot A. Cohen, Gulf War Air Power Survey, Summary Report (Washington, D.C.. GPO, 1993) 145 , and Lt Col Stephen J. McNamara, Air Power's Gordian Knot: Centralized versus Organic Control (Maxwell, AL.: Air University Press, 1994)

⁵ James A. Winnefeld and Dana J Johnson, "Unity of Control: Joint Air Operations in the Gulf," Joint Force Quarterly Summer 1993 . 89., and McNamara, 1

⁶ Graham T. Allison, "Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crisis," reprinted in Halperin and Kanter, Readings in American Foreign Policy (Boston Little, Brown, 1973) 45-84.

⁷ For purposes of this paper, "air assets" and "air power" refer to all fixed wing aircraft, helicopters, and offensive missile systems such as Navy cruise missiles and Army ATACMS

⁸ McNamara, 1

⁹ Winnefeld and Johnson, 90 , and McNamara, 1

¹⁰ Brigadier General Robert H Scales, Jr., Director, Desert Storm Study Project, Certain Victory The US Army in the Gulf War (Washington, D C . 1993) 174-175 , Winnefeld and Johnson, 90 , and Keaney and Cohen, 153

¹¹ McNamara, 124

¹² Winnefeld and Johnson, 90

¹³ Rick Atkinson, Crusade: The Untold Story of the Persian Gulf War (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1993) 152.

¹⁴ Atkinson, 151.

¹⁵ Chris Jeffries, "Bureaucratic Politics in the Department of Defense. A Practitioner's Perspective," Bureaucratic Politics and National Security: Theory and Practice, ed. David C. Kozak and James M. Keagle (Boulder, CO.: Lynne Rienner, 1988) 114.

¹⁶ The JFACC, General Horner, and his staff were fully occupied with deploying massive forces to the Gulf and negotiating with host countries for basing rights. General Schwarzkopf asked the Air Staff for help designing an initial offensive air campaign concept. See Conduct of the Persian Gulf War, 91-92.

¹⁷ Michael R. Gordon and General Bernard E. Trainor, The General's War. The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf, Advance Proof, (Boston, MA.: Little, Brown and Company, est. 1995) 75-98

¹⁸ Winnefeld and Johnson, 93., and Keaney and Cohen, 38.

¹⁹ Atkinson, 64

²⁰ General Bernard Trainor, "Schwarzkopf the General," U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings May 1994: 110.

²¹ Keaney and Cohen, 145.

²² McNamara, 124., and Winnefeld and Johnson, 99

²³ According to Winnefeld and Johnson, "Consideration was given to moving the commander afloat to Riyadh. .But powerful institutional voices within the Navy argued that operational command of the fleet must be exercised by an afloat commander, and that those responsibilities were more important than daily contact with the CINC and the other component commanders, including the JFACC " Bureaucratic politics played a role within, as well as between, the services. See Winnefeld and Johnson, 94.

²⁴ Winnefeld and Johnson, 94

²⁵ McNamara, 127.

²⁶ Keaney and Cohen, 111.

²⁷ Horner, Slide 16 , and Scales, 192-194

²⁸ Scales, 176.

²⁹ Allison, 69-70.

³⁰ Richard P. Hallion, Storm Over Iraq: Air Power and the Gulf War (Washington, D C. Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992) 256.

³¹ Keaney and Cohen, 99-102.

³² Commander Thomas A. Parker, "The Navy Got It: Desert Storm's Wake-Up Call," U S. Naval Institute Proceedings September 1994: 33-36

³³ McNamara, 126 , and Winnefeld and Johnson, 97-98.

³⁴ Lt Gen Royal N. Moore, Jr., "Marine Air: There When Needed," U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings November 1991: 63.

³⁵ McNamara, 133., and Winnefeld and Johnson, 96.

³⁶ McNamara, 128., and Winnefeld and Johnson, 96.

³⁷ Scales, 174

³⁸ Colonel Richard B. H Lewis, "JFACC: Problems Associated with Battlefield Preparation in Desert Storm," Airpower Journal Spring 1994: 16-21.

³⁹ Scales, 141.

⁴⁰ Lewis, 6, 20.

⁴¹ Lewis, 8., and Keaney and Cohen, 102-110.

⁴² Keaney and Cohen, 157

⁴³ Lewis, 14.

⁴⁴ General H Norman Schwarzkopf, It Doesn't Take a Hero (New York. Bantam, 1992) 319.

⁴⁵ Scales, 187., and Lewis, 8

⁴⁶ Lewis, 8-13, 20

⁴⁷ Atkinson, 347.

⁴⁸ Schwarzkopf, 432

⁴⁹ Atkinson, 236

⁵⁰ Schwarzkopf, 431-432.

⁵¹ Scales, 188

⁵² Gordon and Trainor, 471

⁵³ Lewis, 20-21

⁵⁴ Keaney and Cohen, 160.